THE EARLIER PLAYS OF BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

BY A. C. SWINBURNE.

FOR any man born only a little lesser than the greatest, a little lower than the angels or the gods of song, it is the heaviest and most enduring of all conceivable misfortunes to have been rated for a time among them if not above them. That a Jephson or a Tate, a Cibber or an Ibsen, should for a moment be compared or preferred to Shakespeare by any howling dervish or laughing jackass of letters is a matter of no moment: that men of genius should ever have been thrust forward as claimants for so ridiculous a promotion is only too certain to impair or to imperil, it may be for only too many generations, the recognition of their genuine claims to honor. That typical Oxonicule, the Rev. William Cartwright, "the most florid and seraphical preacher in the university," not only damned himself to everlasting fame, but did what in him lay to damn the reputation of Fletcher by assuring his departed spirit that "Shakespeare to thee was dull," obscene, inartistic and scurrilous: dull as compared to the author of "The Nice Valour," obscene as compared to the author of "The Custom of the Country," inartistic as compared to the author of "The Sea Voyage" and scurrilous as compared to the author of "The Scornful Lady." The criticism is worthy of Matthew Arnold: and even he could not have surpassed it in perversity of cultivated impertinence and audacity of self-erratic conceit. But time has always done justice, when time was needed to do justice, on the academic aberrations of complacent incompetence and overweening culture. It is of far more importance that justice should be done to the victims of their admiration. To be dispraised is nothing: to be mispraised may be dangerous. Justice has never been done to Beaumont and Fletcher since the days in which their

work was set up against Shakespeare's. It is time to consider so rich and various a treasure as they have bequeathed us without consideration or recollection of the fact that their garnets were once preferred to Shakespeare's rubies, their pearls to his diamonds. No other dramatic treasury can boast of so magnificent a display in quantity, in quality and in variety of jewels.

It must be allowed that no expert in gems would have given much for the first sample of their workshop. The generous and cordial friendship of Ben Jonson could hardly have applauded so crude and juvenile a study in his school of comedy as "The Woman-Hater." It is readable, absurd and amusing: I cannot think that much more can be said for it. The rather dreary and mouldy Spanish tradition of jocularity on the subject of hunger and gluttony revives here in a final renascence of farcical effect which may charitably be found not altogether unworthy of a tolerant rather than of a sympathetic smile: but the protagonist is a mere monomaniac, and the heroine is too eccentric to pass muster except as a type of the very newest and oldest of new women whom we may meet in the pages of Aristophanes or the columns of the "Times."

In the tragedy of "Thierry and Theodoret" a new touch is felt—a new voice is audible. There is here no trace of Jonson's influence; nor is there any sign of Shakespeare's except in so far as we may say that all subsequent good work in tragedy must inevitably bear witness to the effect of Marlowe's example and of his. For this is good work, as well as new: the impetuous and continuous rush of the fluent and fervent verse is only the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual ardor, headlong and heedless of reflection or restraint, which impels the writer's genius along its passionate and breathless course. Even if, as has been plausibly suggested, the staider and less vehement hand of Massinger may here and there be traced, this play is on the whole about the finest and the fullest evidence left us of Fletcher's magnificent but far from supreme power as a tragic poet. The men are nothing: at least, they are but rough and rudely colored sketches. The abnormal wickedness of Brunhalt, the abnormal goodness of Ordella, give all the life and interest to the tragic action that readers can ever find in it or that spectators ever can have found. It is not quite human life: for the interest excited is hardly in human nature. But, such

as it is, the interest is unflaggingly sustained, and the style is as admirable in its impulsive fashion as is the style of Marlowe and Shakespeare and Webster in the nobler and more serious manner appropriate to higher and sincerer inspiration.

Something more of such inspiration is perceptible in Philaster: and yet, leaving Shakespeare out of the question, we find here no figures comparable for creative power and living truth to Faustus and Edward, to Vittoria and Bracciano, the Duchess and her brothers. The boyish or feminine incapacity to draw even in outline, to paint even in monochrome, the likeness of a man, which is here so unmistakably displayed, was evidently no evidence of inferior power, no reason for inferior regard, in the estimate of contemporary admiration. Among all their tragic or serious heroes we may look in vain for the life-like figure of a conceivable and acceptable man. A gallant and roistering humorist they could paint better and more delightfully, with more contagious sympathy and more audacious truth, than even the great Dumas himself; but the finest type of heroic manhood imaginable by either is a knight of Malta; an Origen in armor; a hero who renounces manhood. Philaster is something worse: he is hardly the shadow, the phantom, the wraith of a living man. The she-page Bellario is simply the loveliest and most interesting of all dramatic hermaphrodites from Shakespeare's Viola down to Wycherley's Fidelia: it is curious and significant that Beaumont and Fletcher could never create a man or a woman so attractive as this fantastic and pathetic figure, whose unquestionable and inimitable charm of perfect purity and more than manly womanhood threw so strange a fascination over the stage that it was a less outrageously than pardonably extravagant exaggeration of the truth which Lamb allowed himself in the assertion that "for many years after the date of Philaster's first exhibition on the stage scarce a play can be found without one of these women pages in it." Certainly, as he adds, "our ancestors seem to have been wonderfully delighted with these transformations of sex." But, after all, it must be admitted that the vital and enduring fascination of this beautiful and famous play depends less on character or on incident than on the exquisite and living loveliness of the style—most attractive when least realistic, most memorable when least dramatic.

The authors of "The Maid's Tragedy" succeeded in showing

themselves at all points superior to the authors of "Philaster." Their poetic power is equal in charm and more perfectly adapted or subordinated to the demands of dramatic art, the laws of theatrical evolution or construction. That they could not draw even in outline the figure of a man—that a protagonist of heroic mould, such as Marlowe's Faustus or Webster's Virginius, was not only unpresentable, but inconceivable by the purely passionate and impulsive nature of their tragic genius—this masterpiece would suffice to prove, even without the evidence of their later tragedies. The heroes, or rather the passive and the braggart figures of manhood proposed for our acceptance as the heroes of the play, are not above the rather lamentable level of Philaster. But the sinners are better than their elders; Pharamond and his Megra are little more than the sketches of a hot-blooded and headlong boy if set against the vivid, vigorous outlines of Evadne and her king. Yet, exquisite though it is as a poem, this famous tragedy is the first example of an English play in which all other considerations are subordinate to the imperious demands, the dominant exactions, of stage effect. Evadne is the one thoroughly credible and thoroughly realized figure in the play: a bad woman who might not have made so bad a man. Of the two heroes it can only be further said that Amintor is abject and Melantius absurd: the king is now and then as theatrical in villainy as they in virtue, and Aspatia is not so much a woman as a mouthpiece and a subject for poetry incomparable in its kind. Shakespeare and Webster did not find it necessary and did not feel impelled to make their heroines talk so lyrically and evoke from other and minor figures such effusion of elegiac eloquence. In the earlier scenes she says now and then something that could not have been bettered by Webster or even by Shakespeare: but she never has enough of life and truth in her to stand beside "one of Shakespeare's women"—or of Webster's.

That Fletcher or any of his friends should have thought it probable or possible for "The Faithful Shepherdess" to find favor on the stage is the most wonderful and unimaginable witness we could have to the delight of an English audience in pure and absolute poetry throughout the age of Shakespeare—during the generation that reaches from the sunrise of Marlowe to the sunset of Shirley. That the loveliest of all pastoral plays ever set by fancy in the frame of a fantastic Arcadia should have

evoked by its failure such noble tributes of indignant admiration from contemporary poets is an accident which may well be held worthy of rejoicing and thanksgiving by all who believe that sympathy and gratitude rather than defamation and envy are natural to all men not utterly ignoble and all competitors not utterly incompetent. The difference between this poem and Milton's exquisitely imitative "Comus" is the difference between a rose with a leaf or two faded or falling, but still fragrant and radiant, and the faultless but scentless reproduction of a rose in academic wax for the admiration and imitation of such craftsmen as must confine their ambition to the laurels of a college or the plaudits of a school. The figures who play their parts on the woodland stage of this fairyland theatre are hardly amenable to criticism as actual or possible men and women. The lover whose love is curable by compliance and destructible by the destruction of his idol's ideal inaccessibility would be absurdly misplaced in the world of comedy or tragedy: in the world of fancy, a world made up of poetic artifice and tradition, he is a perfectly appropriate and coherent figure, native to his fantastic element. To the same world the constant Clorin and the wanton Cloe so unmistakably belong that the serious application of an ethical standard to their conduct or their characters is as inept as a poet's objection to the unimaginative realism of mathematics or a mathematician's to the sterile impotence of poetry if applied to the proof of a theorem or the solution of a problem. The most exquisitely appreciative and the most nearly infallible of critics fell surely for once into inconsistent partiality and untenable paradox when he objected to the contrast of the lascivious with the virginal shepherdess on the score that "such weeds by juxtaposition do not set off but kill sweet flowers," and defended the outrageous obscenities of "The Virgin Martyr" on the plea that they "have a strength of contrast, a raciness and a glow in them which set off the religion of the rest, somehow as Caliban serves to show Miranda." Such dunghill weeds as those were never planted or watered by Fletcher.

It is curious from the historic or literary point of view that the first burlesque ever presented on our stage should still be so very much the best. "The Knight of the Burning Pestle" is at least as superior to "The Rehearsal" at all points as the fifth act of "The Chances" substituted by the author of "The Re-

hearsal" for Fletcher's original fifth act is superior in dramatic force, character and humor to that hasty and headlong scrawl of a sketch. The seemingly incongruous interfusion of serious and sometimes noble poetry might have been expected to destroy the broad comic effect of parody and raillery which it actually heightens. The good old city poet whose cockney heroics it made no unkindly fun of, and whose homely power of pathetic realism was a quality altogether beyond the reach of Beaumont or of Fletcher, might have smiled without wincing at so good-humored and hurtless a caricature of his counter-jumping paladins.

In theatrical magnificence of incident and effect "A King and No King" is as supreme a triumph as is "Othello" or "King Lear" in poetic sublimity and spiritual intensity of truth made manifest and awful in beauty as in terror to all ages of mankind. To say that there is nothing more in it would be shamefully and stupidly false: there is much beautiful writing and much brilliant vivacity of charm. But all serious study of character, all rational or moral evolution of conduct, is wantonly if not shamelessly sacrificed to the immediate effect of vehement if not sometimes galvanic sensation or surprise. The outrages on human possibility in the parts of Gobrias and Arane, the magnanimous murderess in design and the virtuous promoter of a supposedly incestuous passion, would have been impossible to any other poet and even to any other playwright of genius in any way comparable either with Beaumont or with Fletcher. That any soldier king was ever such a blatant braggart and swaggering swashbuckler as Arbaces might surely have been questioned, as now perhaps it may not be, in the days of the poets who decked out his crazy and feather-headed vanity with the splendid plumage of rhetorical rhapsody which, as Macaulay long since observed, so singularly anticipates the discoveries of modern mechanism.

The peculiar boyishness which distinguishes alike the tragic and the comic genius of Beaumont and Fletcher, but more especially the tragic work of Fletcher and the comic work of Beaumont, displays itself most amusingly in the once-famous parts of the three beaten braggarts which in their day were classed with the incomparable figure of Bobadil. The far from subtle or exquisite humor of kicking and cudgelling may have been caught from the example of their illustrious friend and occasional model, Ben

Jonson: but the lightness of touch, the buoyancy of burlesque, must be allowed to give it a tone of contagious pleasantry which the heavier hand of the more serious artist has not given and perhaps did not care to give. The veriest horse-play of farce in the broadest scenes of Beaumont and Fletcher has more of good-humor and harmless or, anyhow, spiteless merriment than is to be looked for in the elaborate and deliberate brutality of such an unsavory masterpiece as "The Silent Woman."

The eccentric tragedy of "Cupid's Revenge" has always been a butt for the shafts of sarcasm rather than criticism. It is certainly somewhat grotesque and amorphous if not abnormal; we cannot be surprised that both Campbell and Dyce should have dismissed it with a bitter word of scorn. But a far greater than they or than any other critic of our great dramatic poets has not only embalmed its noblest passages in the deathless amber of a priceless volume, but has selected it for the supreme honor of a condensed rendering into narrative prose after the fashion of his incomparable "Tales from Shakespeare." The rough and ready improvisation which reduces to a far lower level all the huddled and headlong later part of the play is as evidently due to enforced haste or natural weariness of the work in hand as is the inferiority of the latter part of Marlowe's "Jew of Malta" to the magnificent beauty and power of its opening scenes. To imagine in either or in any such case the necessary or the probable intervention or intrusion of a foreign hand and a feebler touch is a facile and uncritical evasion rather than explanation of a problem suggested by the naturally inevitable inequality of the finished parts with the hurried parts of even a great writer's work, when casually compelled to write against time for the stage or for any other pulpit or tribune required for the utterance of whatever he has to say. But no pantomimic absurdity in the opening and no convulsive debility in the closing scenes of the play can efface or should be allowed to affect the impression of the two scenes between Leucippus and his mistress before and after his chivalrous and mendacious affirmation of her virtue has resulted, during his absence at the seat of war, in her marriage with his father: a situation treated with characteristic frankness, but handled with exceptional delicacy. It may be remembered that Mr. Samuel Pepys, on August 17th, 1668, "saw 'Cupid's Revenge,' under the new name of 'Love Despised,' that

hath something very good in it, though I like not the whole body of it." The somewhat eccentric judge who preferred Tuke as a dramatic poet to Shakespeare at his very highest was on this occasion exactly and excellently right. He and Lamb ("Powers eternal! such names mingled!") have alone been just in their expressed or implied judgment of this otherwise unlucky play.

There are some pretty lines thrown away here and there on the not very brilliant masque in celebration of the ill-omened nuptials of Prince Rupert's ill-starred mother; but Beaumont would perhaps have done as well to leave such work to the stronger and more inventive hand of his friend Ben Jonson, whose influence for good and evil, or at least for better and for worse, is evident in Beaumont's part of the "Four Plays in One," which we must regret to remember as the only surviving example of a form of dramatic entertainment to which a horrible as well as terrible little work of relentless and realistic genius never to be unquestioningly rejected from the Shakspearean Apocrypha must pretty certainly be admitted to belong. From what context of companion plays or playlets such an inhuman or at least such a merciless masterpiece of condensed and concentrated horror as "A Yorkshire Tragedy" can have been detached by its publisher or its author, no imaginable student above the lowest level of brainless and frontless duncery will care or will presume to conjecture. In the present unique instance it would not be difficult for the youngest possible reader of average intelligence to distinguish and to determine the parts assignable to Beaumont from the parts assignable to Fletcher. The Jonsonian induction is Beaumont's: he was never worse employed than in imitation of his great friend Ben: *exemplar vitiis imitabile* if ever there was one. No one but a poet born could have written "The Triumph of Honor," though he could only have written it during a transitory eclipse or collapse of his better powers; no one but an imitator of Ben Jonson when least happily inspired could have scribbled the farcical part of it. "The Triumph of Love" should have been a beautiful and pathetic play instead of a beautiful and pathetic sketch: but as it is we must gladly acknowledge that one lovely scene in it has been overpraised neither by Charles Lamb nor by Leigh Hunt. "The Triumph of Death," in which there certainly is no suggestion of loveliness or pathos, is a

superb example of Fletcher's vehement and fervent, though neither gentle nor sublime, genius for passionate and headlong tragedy. "The Triumph of Time" is a survival of the unfittest—a revival of the obsolete morality play, not improved by a dash of the contemporary masque. It is by no means worthless: but its author would probably have been the first to admit that it was not worth very much.

The noble and cordial verses in which Ben Jonson expressed the fervor of his love for a younger friend who had shown such religious devotion towards him should be borne in mind by the reader who cannot but think that the "religion" so affectionately acknowledged and so generously requited did not bring forth any very sweet or savory fruit in the rather too Jonsonian comedy of "The Scornful Lady." In all the curious and interesting history of opinion—of moral and intellectual change and progress and reaction—there is nothing more singular than the variations of view among intelligent and honorable men as to decency and indecency, morality and immorality. It must surely be now incomprehensible to any student of letters or of ethics that so unquestionably good and true a man as Dr. Johnson should have denounced the noble and natural story of "Tom Jones" as a "corrupt" book, and agreed with the clergy of his day in commending to decent readers the infamous and abominable story of "Pamela." If the one is sometimes blunt, the other is always vile. "The Scornful Lady" is, of course, not so ignoble and impure an abortion of immorality as Richardson's shamelessly shameful book; and in a rough way it is a vigorous and memorable example of the very broadest comedy: but alike in matter and in manner, in language and in character, it is undeniably the coarsest work of its authors. And yet it was so long held comparatively blameless that this particular discredit has generally been transferred to a far less offensive work of more graceful if still somewhat graceless audacity in treatment and in humor. Even Wycherley, if at his worst more basely and brutally immoral, was hardly more impudent in theatrical invention or device of daringly and undeniably comic effect.

The strange and straggling tragi-comedy of "The Coxcomb" is as unadvisedly and as singularly misnamed from the idiotic protagonist of the uninterestingly extravagant underplot as is a far more memorable example of dramatic poetry, the master-

piece at once of Middleton and of Rowley which was somehow most absurdly misbaptized as "The Changeling." In the gentle and devoted heroine of the more serious part there is a touch of simplicity and sweetness, in devotion and submission, of daring and of patience, which distinguishes her as a daughter of Beaumont's genius from the more vehement and voluble children of Fletcher's. Another play which is no less obviously a compound work, not less interesting and not less insufficient to satisfy a serious and grateful admirer of their sometimes rather idle and irregular genius, is "The Honest Man's Fortune." The hero is a nobler and manlier type of manhood than any of Fletcher's when left to work by himself; but the movement and ease and spontaneity of the action in all but his very worst and hastiest and most puerile plays, if not even in those rather pitiful puerilities of invention and execution, will hardly be found in this more serious and ambitious poem. The two heroines are admirably sketched rather than admirably painted: but the simplicity and nobility of nature apparent and consistent in them both would be not less hard to find in the more theatrical and conventional heroines of Fletcher's later plays. There are noble passages and magnificent couplets in the little poem appended to this play: it would be difficult if not impossible to match them for moral dignity and for majesty of expression in any other work of Fletcher's: but few readers will probably agree with Leigh Hunt that they suffice to corroborate or to justify the expressed regret of Coleridge that Beaumont and Fletcher had not devoted their genius and their time to writing poems rather than to writing plays.

The ingrained and ineradicable juvenility of mind which distinguishes them from all other men of true and splendid genius is or should be at once apologetically and amusingly patent if not obvious to the readers of that admirably written comedy so childishly misnamed "The Captain": misnamed from a Jonsonian figure of farce who is once happily humanized by generous sympathy and pity for the supposed sufferings of an elder soldier. The monstrous and abnormal criminality of the almost incredible heroine is more like the impudent fancy of a naughty boy than the corrupt imagination of a depraved man. But so bright and lively a piece of work would in common scholastic justice be set down so decidedly to the youngster's credit as to be deservedly

set against the discredit if not the disgrace due to the juvenile audacity of his immature imagination. And the first scene of cajolery in which the woman's magnificent art of passionate hypocrisy is brought to bear upon a half-conscious and half-reluctant victim, a would-be dupe who cannot dupe himself, is finer than anything I know of the kind in prose or poetry before the advent of Balzac's almighty and ever-living Valérie. Madame Marneffe is as matchless as Madame de Merteuil: but the patrician or the plebeian she-devil of immortal fiction might have given a smile of sympathy if not a hand of sisterhood to the hardly less terrible harlot of an English poet's invention.

In the magnificent melodrama or tragi-comedy of "The Little French Lawyer," it would be impossible to overpraise the brilliancy of invention, the deftness of composition or the splendor of execution: but the brutality of boyhood is as evident as its joyfulness. From any other hand the ruffianly insolence which derides the infirmity of a veteran hero in the public street would be unendurable and unpardonable; but here the merciless infidelity of the bride who has played false to her earlier and younger lover makes it intelligible if inexcusable. And here the incomparable and inimitable lightness of touch which impairs the tragic work and glorifies the comic work of Fletcher must be allowed by all intelligent or æsthetic judges to redeem the offence which would else be given to the moral or ethical critic of the superb result or outcome of his weakness and his strength—his inevitable limitations and his magnificent capacities. The juvenile horse-play of practical jokes which animates at once the serious comedy and the rampant farce of this dazzling and delightful poem, a poem in which no alloy of grave or of humorous prose can anywhere be found latent or apparent, contrives in some inexplicable if not inexcusable but bewitching if not irresistible fashion to succeed somehow in fusing them together with such instinctive alchemy of inspiration as to yield by way of product or result a deathless if not blameless masterpiece of comic poetry.

It is impossible to imagine that the author of this most brilliant and buoyant and high-spirited piece of work can have had anything to do, or that his even more glorious friend and compeer can have had anything to do, with one of the dullest and feeblest plays surviving—another survival of the unfittest—from the

marvellous and matchless harvest of their time. The Apocrypha of the Scripture bequeathed to us by Beaumont and Fletcher may be more easily and more decisively tested and gauged and disposed of than the Apocrypha of Shakespeare's. That the bright and pleasant comedy of "The Widow" is Middleton's work alone will hardly be questioned by any reader whose time would not be better spent on even the most futile of employments or diversions than in the study of poetic or comic drama: and the most conscientious examination will only find in "The Faithful Friends" a passage or a verse here and there which may charitably be thought not quite bad enough for an old Sharpham or a new Shakespeare. It is perhaps not so utterly worthless and hopeless a failure as "Cupid's Whirligig" or "Thomas Lord Cromwell." But it is sad stuff.

The riotous and outrageous farce of "Wit at Several Weapons" is such a play as might conceivably have been written in his nonage by a bastard son of Ben Jonson who had inherited more of the worse than of the better qualities, intellectual and moral, of his illustrious father. Even Ben, whose indignant humor so often concerned itself with crime, would hardly have introduced at the very opening of the action as a figure of pure comedy a veteran in villainy who boasts to his own son of his early successes as a professional pimp, and his later gains by the robbery and ruin of little children confided to his guardianship. This is the most seriously and odiously revolting passage in all the various and voluminous work of these great dramatic poets—or of any that I can remember among their fellows. And this comes of taking life and character too lightly and too stagily. The play is throughout a very slight and rather childish piece of work, with some touches in it of fun rather than of humor—unless there be humor in a schoolboy's pillow-fight. But the intended fun of the opening could only seem funny to an exceptionally ill-conditioned schoolboy. It is only fair to add that some of the heroine's tricks and shifts to rid herself of an idiot suitor and attract a hesitating lover are really not unworthy to remind the reader of Molière in his broader and rougher mood of practical pleasantry.

The genius of Beaumont and Fletcher for pure comedy was at its nadir in "Wit at Several Weapons": in "Wit Without Money" it rises easily and visibly to its radiant zenith. The

matchless instinct of expression, the incomparable lightness of touch, which distinguishes its best work from all other triumphs of poetic comedy in the language, carries off and sweeps away all too curious or serious consideration of character or conduct. But, indeed, if the protagonist is a somewhat too extravagant figure of humorous extravagance when he joyously makes away with his brother's fortune as well as his own, the younger brother is so noble a fellow when he refuses to resent his ruin, or to forget the finer qualities of his reckless and rapacious elder, that this single figure should suffice to confute all charges ever brought against his creator or his twin creators on the score of immoral incompetence to conceive or to present a morally attractive and admirable young English hero. Even Shakespeare—to say nothing of Jonson, who in this race is quite out of the running—can show no other to be set beside him.*

The curious laxity with which educated and able men will fling about epithets when engaged in critical comment is rather singularly exemplified in the terms applied by Dyce as well as by Hallam to so magnificent a work of comic and tragic genius as "The Custom of the Country." Dryden's previous attack on it as compared with his own dirty and greasy comedies and those of his brighter but not less unsavory rivals may be dismissed with a brief expression of regret that so great a writer should have shown himself so small a critic—so stupidly shameless in misjudgment alike from the moral or ethical and from the intelligent or æsthetic point of view. "The very grossest" (as Mr. Dyce unhappily miscalls it) of all these plays is beyond all question "The Scornful Lady." "The Custom of the Country" is certainly almost as audacious a comic poem as is even the alarmingly fearless and morally rather than immorally impudent "Lysistrata": but coarse or obscene it is not. There is not a dirty word in it: not a touch, not a whiff, of Swiftian or Carlylesque impurity.

When some forgotten fool observed to Byron that Italian was an easy language, the supreme and final and unapproachable master of serio-comic poetry replied with unusual good sense

* Why Frank should be sometimes called Francisco is as insoluble a mystery as why the word "else," a word as necessary to the sense as to the metre, should have been persistently omitted by all editors in the penultimate scene of this comedy. "Do not allure me," says Valentine when secure of his bride. "Thou art no widow of this world (else)!" Without this obvious little word the line is immetrical nonsense.

and accuracy: "A very easy language to know badly; a very difficult language to know well." It would be no less easy to pass judgment on Fletcher as a tragic poet in a sweeping and summary fashion: it is certainly no less difficult to adjust the due balance of praise and blame, whether positive or comparative, which must determine the verdict to be passed on the admirable, though anything but impeccable, author of such tragedies as "Bonduca," "Valentinian" and "The Double Marriage." Brilliant even to splendor, ardent even to satiety, they most indisputably are. That their somewhat hectic and feverish glory cannot endure a moment's comparison with the sunlight or the starlight of Shakespeare's, of Marlowe's and of Webster's is anything but a reproach to a poet whose fame, if eclipsed, is not and can never be effaced by theirs.

The dazzling tragedy of "Bonduca" is half lit up by the flame of the footlights and half by the radiance of a magnificent if uncertain day. That it wanes and withers into the dusk of an autumnal sunset before the deathless dawn of Tennyson's almost Æschylean "Boadicea" can only be acknowledged as inevitable. That more than one or two of his contemporaries might have made out of the subject a far more perfect and a far sublimer poem is as certain as that none of them could have turned it to such triumphant account from the not ignobly theatrical point of view. But the reader of Fletcher's tragedies can never quite get away from the besetting sense of the theatre. In this, instance the incongruous and excessive admixture or immixture of broad and not always brilliant comedy deforms and degrades the tragic beauty of the nobler scenes. The death scene is splendid and memorable: but while reading it we must not remember such another and more magnificent example of poetic tribute to the sacred and heroic virtue of suicide in face of shame as Marston had set in the immolation of his Sophonisba. The best by far of Fletcher's martial heroes is Caratach: and his nephew is a much finer and more natural youngster than Shakespeare's far less life-like and lovable Arthur in "King John": who would have made us reasonably doubt whether the omnipotent hand of his creator could have created a living little boy if it had not left us at a later date the incomparable and unapproachable and adorable figure of Mamillius.

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